

## Introduction: global challenges for sociology

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## Introduction: Global Challenges for Sociology

### Abstract

With the 50th anniversary of the journal, this special issue takes stock of the progress that has been made within sociology to become a more globally oriented discipline and discusses the new challenges for the future that emerge as a consequence. From its inception, classical sociology was primarily concerned with the European origins of processes of modernity that were to become global. There was little discussion of how the global might be understood in terms of structures, processes and social movements not directly identified as European but nonetheless contributing to modernity. The challenge for sociology has been to take into account these other phenomena and to rethink its core categories and concepts in light of newly understood alternative formations of the global and the social movements that bring them about.

### Keywords

Capitalism, Colonialism, Epistemology, Global Sociology, Methodology, Social Movements

Gurminder K Bhambra (University of Warwick and Linnaeus University) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (University of Coimbra and University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Corresponding Author: Gurminder K Bhambra, University of Warwick,  
[g.k.bhambra@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:g.k.bhambra@warwick.ac.uk)

I

A complex set of factors has contributed, in recent times, to suggest that social scientific discourse and theorizing in the global North, and the cultural premises underlying them, are western-centric and problematic. This involves questioning the monopoly of knowledge about society that they claim to hold. It also involves examining the supposed universality of their cultural premises. The contributing factors to this questioning include the emergence and rise, over the last forty years, of social movements in the global South. These movements have challenged in profound ways the conventional or critical understanding of society and social transformation put forward by standard social science. They have also resorted to non-western symbolic universes and cultural premises, and have often expressed their struggles and demands in non-colonial languages, which the social sciences had previously viewed as objects of study and, at most, vehicles of information, but never as valid knowledge claims in themselves.

This re-visioning of the social sciences has been prompted also by the seemingly irreversible shift to the East, particularly to Asia, of the dynamism of global capitalism, which had until recently resided along a Euro-North-America axis. This shift has put to rest the Orientalist view of the East as a once dynamic but long since stagnant region and culture of the world. Further, in recent years, social scientists, often based in the global South but also in the global North, have been calling for recognition of the epistemic and cultural diversity of the world and, concomitantly, for the need to 'provincialize' the epistemic and cultural premises of Eurocentred knowledge, in general, and of the social sciences, in particular (see Chakrabarty 2000, Connell 2007, Patel 2010, Shilliam 2011).

These trends pose several challenges to the social sciences as we currently know them. Will the different disciplines, for instance, sociology, retain their general character, even if being more globally oriented? What, then, would that global orientation mean? Would it mean that the core epistemological, theoretical and methodological frameworks remain the same, even if perhaps more sensitive to the diversity of the world? Or, to the contrary might it be that the cultural and epistemological premises of western-centric sociology are such that they incapacitate the discipline ever to account for the diversity of the world in ways that do not ultimately suppress the very diversity they seek to describe? If that is the case, could we still aim at *a singular global* sociology? Or, rather, should we aim at *several alternative* global sociologies? Would such sociologies continue to be disciplines in the conventional theoretical, methodological, and institutional sense?

There are no easy answers to these challenges and questions. But the simple fact that they have emerged is changing the conversation among social scientists across the globe. This special issue of *Sociology* is a powerful demonstration of such a change. We have ourselves, in earlier work, grappled with these challenges and questions in order to provide different but complementary responses. We start from the same historical fact that, from its inception, classical sociology was primarily concerned with what it understood to be the European origins of processes of modernity that were to become global. There is little disagreement between us regarding the necessity of considering the historical processes of dispossession, enslavement, appropriation, and extraction as central to the emergence of the modern world. We also agree that the challenge for sociology has been to take into account these other processes and interactions and to rethink its core categories and concepts in light of other, and newly understood, formations of the global. Only if such challenges are successfully met will it be possible to aspire to a global cognitive justice with material effects.

Our approaches – which have been formulated under two general orientations: towards 'epistemologies of the South' (Santos, 2014) and towards 'connected sociologies' (Bhambra

2014) – deal with different aspects of the challenges facing sociology. Bhambra is interested in intervening in the discipline from the inside by demonstrating the inadequacies of current sociological accounts of modernity and the global in order to facilitate better sociological accounts of a reconfigured modernity (Bhambra 2007, 2014). In contrast, Santos (2014) intervenes from the outside by confronting social sciences and social scientific knowledge with non-scientific, popular, vernacular knowledge, with a view to building what he calls new ‘ecologies of knowledges’. In our opinion, both interventions are necessary at this time, and the articles collected together in this special issue are witness to that.

Santos’s (2014) ‘*epistemologies of the south*’ concern the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. He designates the vast and vastly diversified field of such experiences as *the anti-imperial south*. It is an epistemological, non-geographical south, composed of many epistemological souths having in common the fact that they all give rise to knowledges born in struggles. Counter-knowledges are produced wherever such struggles occur. The objective of the project of epistemologies of the south is to allow oppressed social groups to represent the world as their own and in their own terms, for only thus will they be able to change it according to their own aspirations. Given the uneven development of capitalism and the persistence of western-centric colonialism, the epistemological south and the geographical south partially overlap, particularly as regards those countries that were subjected to colonialism. But the overlap is only partial, not only because the epistemologies of the north also flourish in the geographical south (the imperial south, the epistemological ‘little Europes’ present and often dominating in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Oceania) but also because the epistemological south is also to be found in the geographical north in many of the ongoing struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

From this perspective, the north-centric, western-centric thinking is an abyssal thinking. It is premised upon an abyssal line separating metropolitan societies and forms of sociability from colonial societies and forms of sociability; whatever is valid, normal or ethical on the metropolitan side of the line does not apply on the colonial side. As this abyssal line is as basic as it is invisible, it allows for false universalisms based on the social experience of metropolitan societies and sociabilities aimed at reproducing and justifying the normative dualism metropolis/colony. Being on the other, colonial, side amounts to being prevented from representing the world as one’s own and in one’s own terms. Herein lies the crucial role of the epistemologies of the north: by producing and, at the same time, obscuring the abyssal line, they are incapable of recognizing the distinction between abyssal exclusions (those occurring on the colonial side of sociability) and non-abyssal exclusions (those on the metropolitan side).

Moreover, they conceive of the Eurocentric epistemological north as the only source of valid knowledge, no matter where, in geographic terms, the latter is produced. On these terms, the only valid understanding of the world is the western understanding of the world and this is what 'epistemologies of the south' seek to challenge.

For Bhambra (2014), the central concern of '*connected sociologies*', is the disciplinary formation of sociology and its understanding of how the modern world came to be configured and represented. She examines the historical narratives that inform sociological conceptions of the contemporary world order and finds them wanting in terms of offering adequate explanations of the processes that brought the modern world into being. As such, she argues for the necessity of broader, connected histories and thus for the revision of sociology and the social sciences on this basis. Accounting for the contemporary configuration of the world, and addressing the inequalities that we find there, she argues, requires taking seriously the understandings of the broader historical processes through which the social sciences have been constituted. This process, as Santos also argues, involves undoing hierarchies and provincializing knowledges. But, Bhambra suggests, deconstruction is not enough if those knowledges are seen to have been separately constituted and, further, not themselves constituted through connections.

In arguing for 'connected sociologies', then, Bhambra is arguing for recognition of the historical connections generated by processes of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation, that were previously elided in mainstream sociology. She is also making a case for the use of 'connections' as a way of recuperating these alternative histories, and, therefore, providing the basis for more adequate sociological accounts of the present. This theoretical conceptualization draws on the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997) on 'connected histories' in which he argues for an understanding of events as constituted by processes that are always broader than the selections that bound them as particular and specific. In this way, the approach of 'connected sociologies' seeks to reconstruct theoretical categories – their relations and objects – to create new understandings that incorporate and transform previous ones. The impetus is transformative as opposed to additive.

Both Bhambra and Santos believe that the social sciences as currently constituted continue to be in need of deep questioning. Such questioning may occur at a disciplinary or a transdisciplinary level; it may focus primarily on epistemological or on theoretical/methodological dimensions; it may be more interested in the history of social scientific thought or in current global scientific diversity. The articles in this special issue speak to this diversity and, taken together, they show the complementarity among the different approaches in terms of, collectively, building the resources for the social sciences to be different in the future. The

first group of articles (Savransky, Tilley, Omobowale and Akanle) takes issue with the general understandings of the social sciences, in theoretical, methodological, and conceptual terms, and presents alternative ways of thinking (within) the social sciences. Radical alternative theorizing always implies other epistemologies (ways of knowing) if not other ontologies (ways of being) and definitely other methodologies (how to advance knowledge within a given way of knowing). These issues are addressed directly within this group of articles.

Savransky, for example, argues for the necessity of what he terms a decolonial break from the standard Eurocentric epistemologies of the social sciences. However, this is not simply a break from particular modes of knowledge production. Rather, in his terms, it is also a call for a deeper questioning of the metaphysical structures of the imagination that would profoundly alter the standard relationship between epistemology and ontology. To this end, Savransky calls for a re-engagement of sociology and anthropology, and a more thoroughgoing engagement with the work, and more specifically, the realities of social movements. As he argues, in order to avoid reproducing Eurocentrism in the process of criticizing it, it is imperative to consider other ways of being side by side with other ways of knowing.

The articulation between epistemology and methodology is also highlighted in Tilley's article where she argues that decolonizing social theory implies decolonizing the sociological methodologies currently in use as well. Tilley argues that a simple deconstruction of Eurocentric epistemologies is not necessarily sufficient to address the colonial forms of appropriation and domination that they are constituted by and through. She strongly urges us to consider the – especially, extractive – forms of political economy embodied within the institutions in which knowledge is most often produced and, drawing on the work respectively of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, calls on us to consider the ethics of method within our work in the social sciences. Taking into account developments in the related discipline of geography, Tilley uses concepts of 'biopiracy' and 'geopiracy' to call for greater attentiveness to ethics within the methods of social sciences.

The impulse for a global sociology, in the sense of exploring different ways of theorizing the social, is developed nicely in the article by Omobowale and Akanle. They reflect on the fact that even when there has been international recognition of the work of scholars such as Akinsola Akiwowo, his theories and research have not been taken up in his home location of Nigeria. They attribute this to the global hierarchies associated with knowledge production where knowledge produced in the West is seen as being of universal value, while that from elsewhere is only of relative or particular value. To counter this tendency, they examine Asuwada's theory of sociation and locate it within understandings of global social science. They further discuss the complexities of researching and teaching in Nigeria and the challenges associated with utilizing

‘southern’ theories in the ‘south’. They ask – and answer – the question of why it can often be difficult for African, and Southern scholars in general, to take up their own (Southern) theories and epistemologies in research and teaching.

While the articles discussed thus far could be seen to be predominantly engaged with theoretical issues, albeit through the working out of specific empirical case-studies, the subsequent articles (Bonelli and Vicherat Mattar, Mocombe, Raman, Qi, Luthfa) are oriented more specifically to discussing the knowledge claims that emerge through the examination of differently located social movements.

The theme of how we understand social connections and also a sense of ‘exhaustion’ with the limitations of standard social scientific paradigms permeates the article by Bonelli and Vicherat Mattar. They point, for example, to the need to understand what they call ‘equivocal connections’ between different sensory worlds. That is, to understand that there are not simply different perspectives *about* the world, but, following Vivieros de Castro, that every perspective *opens up* different worlds. Bonelli and Vicherat Mattar do this empirically through two case studies focusing predominantly on ‘the body’ both in terms of the body of the people and bodies themselves. In particular, they look at the long and controversial interactions between the Mapuche people and the Chilean state in the period after its forcible expansion over the independent indigenous territory (or nation) at the southernmost tip of the landmass.

Mocombe, in turn, takes the historical emergence of the Haitian nation as his site of investigation and examines the place of Vodou religion and philosophy within the revolutionary period. He seeks to contrast the ‘Protestant ethic’ of the *Affranchis* – that is the white, mulatto and petit-bourgeois classes living in Haiti – with, what he calls, the ‘Vodou ethic’ and its inspiration for the establishment of the spirit of (revolutionary) communism and communal living among the African-born majority population of Haiti. Mocombe traces the oppositional history of these philosophies and movements and suggests that the future of Haiti continues to hang in the balance between them. With this article, Mocombe expands the sociological lexicon through a working out of the new concept within its specific history and opens the way for thinking about the possibilities for its use in other contexts and locations.

The concept of ‘subaltern modernity’ is introduced by Raman as a way of examining a variety of resistance movements located in the state of Kerala in India. He focuses on movements from colonial times, from the period of decolonization and also those that occur in the period of post-Independence state formation. In the discussion of all three, Raman examines how the resistant subaltern practices embodied in these movements, although regional in context, nonetheless configured emergent notions of emancipatory knowledge with universal relevance.

As such, in this article Raman argues for an extension of Kantian understandings of Enlightenment from places other than the 'exhausted' Western realm.

Qi continues the focus on social movements, but shifts our gaze from southern India to contemporary China and argues for the examination of social movements there through the concept of *guanxi*. *Guanxi*, she suggests, is constituted through the social embeddedness of relationships based on horizontal relations of esteem and, as such, provides a way of understanding the more common informal networks associated with social movement activities. With this, Qi seeks to enhance our understandings of social movements in general and of the concept of *guanxi* itself. She points to the limitations of simply relying on 'social network' approaches or those of weak and strong ties and argues instead for the necessity of understanding social movements in China through concepts and categories that directly address the specificities of context.

Luthfa, on the other hand, uses the idea of 'long and strong ties' to examine the transnational solidarities central to the success of a particular environmentally focused social justice movement in northern Bangladesh. She outlines the way in which the local protestors created and sustained links with transnational actors and examines the reasons why such transnational solidarity enabled a successful outcome in this case. Luthfa uses this example to develop a typology of ties and actors and through her analysis suggests the importance of 'reciprocal tenacity and mutual obligation' as factors that could explain the strength and longevity of such transnational ties. This group of articles sees the possibilities for global sociology as strongly associated with an engagement with the knowledge claims produced by social movements and the challenge for the future would be to engage more consistently with them in the variety of their locations.

The final pair of articles (Pradella, Ascione) in this special issue both address Marx and Marxist ideas of capital and value from contrasting global south perspectives. One rethinks Marxism in light of the renewed centrality of colonialism in the social sciences; while the other unthinks Marx's magnum opus, *Das Kapital*, for its failure to accommodate a post-Eurocentric view of the relation between capitalism and colonialism. Pradella seeks to recover Marx's silenced historical sociological understandings of colonialism in order to read them back into his analysis of accumulation and, more generally, of capitalism. She argues that there is a wealth of material that points to Marx's engagement with such histories, but the refusal of scholars to engage seriously with it is part of the problematic assertion of Marx as Eurocentric. In contrast, she argues for an engagement with the analyses made by Marx and Smith regarding the relationship of colonialism to capitalism as a way of more fully investigating our shared global histories.



Ascione, in turn, seeks to expand our understandings of capital as a social relation by bringing it into conversation more explicitly with the histories of enslavement and indigeneity with which it is entangled but less often theorized. He further employs the concept of *muri*, developed by Japanese thinker Uno Kōzō, as a way of conceptualizing the capital-labour and capital-nature relationships in a way beyond the standard Eurocentric accounts. *Muri*, as Ascione argues, points to the excess of destruction produced by capitalism beyond its self-valorization. In sum, he points to the necessity of thinking, or unthinking, capital in terms of the variety and multiplicity of forms of violence at its core.

The articles gathered together in this special issue engage variously with the 'global futures' of sociology and in making arguments for sociology to better conceptualize its global futures, the articles often point also to the necessity for sociology to address its global past. It is only by understanding our shared and entangled histories that we can hope to be better prepared to meet the social and sociological challenges of the future.

These challenges will arise in new forms of inequality and injustice and, in that sense, sociology needs to be a future-oriented discipline alert to how the world is changing to call into question previous certainties, especially those associated with US-European dominance (including its self-understandings enshrined within sociology). However, we can be certain that those new forms of inequality and injustice will have continuities and connections with the past. The problem that confronts the discipline is that its understandings of the past do not have the means to identify those continuities and connections. If the injustices of the past continue into the present and are in need of repair (and reparation), that reparative work must also be extended to the disciplinary structures that obscure as much as illuminate the paths ahead.

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Gurminder K Bhambra is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick and Guest Professor of Sociology and History at the Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at Linnaeus University, Sweden. She is author of *Connected Sociologies* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave, 2007), which won the 2008 Philip Abrams Memorial Prize for best first book in sociology. She has co-edited four collections, *Silencing Human Rights* (Palgrave, 2009); *1968 in Retrospect* (Palgrave, 2009); *African Athena* (OUP, 2011); *European Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2016). She also set up the Global Social Theory website (<http://globalsocialtheory.org/>).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos is Professor of Sociology, University of Coimbra (Portugal), and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He earned an LL.M and J.S.D. from Yale University and holds the Degree of Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa, by McGill University. He is director of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra and has written and published widely on the issues of globalization, sociology of law and the state, epistemology, social movements and the World Social Forum. He has been awarded several prizes, most recently the Science and Technology Prize of Mexico, 2010, and the Kalven Jr. Prize of the Law and Society Association, 2011.